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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000075

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: HAMAS DECLARES VICTORY FROM DAMASCUS, NOW FOCUSED  
ON RECONSTRUCTION MONEY AND CONSOLIDATING, POLITICAL GAINS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 68

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 48

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 42

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Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, reasons 1.5 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Speaking from Damascus late January 21, Hamas Politburo chief Khaled Mesha'al declared victory over Israel and quoted Winston Churchill in praise of Gazan sacrifices in their fight for "liberty." Mesha'al promised to compensate families who suffered losses, argued donors should funnel relief funds to Hamas, and reaffirmed support for inter-Palestinian dialogue. Separately, Hamas and other Palestinian exile groups told visiting Norwegian envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer that the Gaza conflict reaffirmed the importance of armed resistance against Israel and that Hamas had advanced as a political entity at the expense of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Meanwhile, Hamas will soon send another team to Egypt to demand lifting of the Israeli siege and opening of all Gaza border crossings as conditions for a cease-fire of no longer than one year. Hamas's growing confidence reflects continuing support from Syria, Iran, and Qatar, open recognition by Saudi King Abdullah of "mistakes" in Arab policy toward Israel, and European claims that Hamas has to part of the "solution." Mesha'al's bravado regarding Gazan sacrifices may diminish if human rights groups apply even-handed scrutiny to both sides in the Gaza conflict. End Summary.

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Mesha'al Declares Victory, Praises Gazan Sacrifices  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) In a televised January 21 statement carried by the Al-Quds satellite channel, al-Jazeera, and al-Arabyia, Mesha'al justified Hamas's stand in Gaza as an eternal fight against Israeli occupation. He said Israel had sought but failed to break the resistance and remove it from Gaza. Instead, Palestinians had stood their ground and won against a militarily superior enemy, showing that Israel would not be secure until it ended its occupation of Palestinian territory. Mesha'al denounced Israeli "massacres" and cited them as proof that the Israeli army was attempting to cover up its defeat. Speaking to families who had lost members in the fighting, Mesha'al pledged to compensate them for their sacrifices. Quoting Winston Churchill, Mesha'al said the Palestinian sacrifice of "blood, toil, tears and sweat" had been necessary in the pursuit of Palestinian "liberty."

Mesha'al also remarked that the Palestinians had suffered fewer casualties than London or Paris in World War II.

13. (SBU) Turning toward the region, Mesha'al expressed thanks to the Arab leaders who had convened at the Arab Economic Forum in Kuwait and had made generous pledges to reconstructing Gaza. He also argued that the pledged assistance should be distributed to Hamas, and not the "corrupt" Palestinian Authority (PA). Mesha'al maintained he remained committed to pursuing inter-Palestinian dialogue "on the basis of resistance and adherence to national rights," and also called on the international community to establish a war crimes tribunal against Israel for the use of prohibited weapons against civilians in Gaza. Mesha'al referenced upcoming discussions in Cairo, saying Hamas would continue fighting its battle for the lifting of the Israeli siege and opening of the border crossings. These were preludes, he continued, to the battle of liberating the land, recapturing Jerusalem, fulfilling the right of return, and ending the occupation. The resistance "should maintain its finger on the trigger" and be alert to the enemy who is "seeking vengeance after consecutive defeats in Lebanon and Gaza."

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Hamas and Palestinian Groups Support Political Dialogue  
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14. (C) Mesha'al's speech followed a week of internal Hamas consultations and meetings with other Palestinian exile groups in Syria. According to a Norwegian Embassy readout on new Norwegian Special Envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer's January 18-20 visit here, Hamas is seeking to convene an inter-Palestinian

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conference to reach a common set of principles on a unified Palestinian government. Mesha'al reportedly told Hanssen-Bauer that Hamas's political popularity had increased as a result of the group's survival against Israeli forces and that it was time to unify the Palestinian factions under one banner. In separate meetings with the Norwegians, Mesha'al and other Palestinian leaders agreed that the big loser had been Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, whose term had officially expired January 9. Mesha'al reported told Hanssen-Bauer that he remained open to dialogue and reconciliation with Abbas, but Abbas would have to treat him as an equal and meet Hamas's demands for the PA to release Hamas detainees in the West Bank. In the meantime, Hamas had expressed a willingness to agree to a transitional PA government staffed by technocrats until presidential elections could be organized.

15. (C) Mesha'al was emphatic Hamas remained committed to armed resistance, according to our Norwegian contact. Mesha'al stressed there had been no agreed ceasefire, but rather two separate unilateral actions. Hamas was willing to agree on a ceasefire for up to a year, provided Israel met the group's demands for a complete troop withdrawal, lifting of the siege, opening of border crossings, and presence of Hamas security on the Rafah and other crossing points. Hamas scoffed at the idea of not re-arming. "They view armed resistance against illegal occupation as a right under international law," our Norwegian colleague reported, noting "many international lawyers would agree with them."

16. (C) Hamas officials under Mesha'al admitted to Hanssen-Bauer that the fighting had caused extensive damage to Gaza's civilian infrastructure which would require a long time and significant resources to rebuild. Mesha'al reportedly said that the local population supported the opposition more now than ever. But in separate meetings, other Hamas contacts and leaders from PFLP-GC did not appear as confident about Gazan support for further armed resistance. All the factions voiced agreement, however, that Hamas had won more than just a morale victory; Hamas had

stood up to Israel and not flinched, they told the Norwegians.

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Arab Remarks in Doha and Kuwait Buoy Hamas Position  
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17. (C) Our Norwegian colleague also reported that Hamas and other Palestinian contacts were saying that calls by Syrian President Asad and other Arab leaders in Doha and the Arab Economic Forum in Kuwait for Arab states to break ties with Israel had also helped the Palestinian cause. Though Asad's call to suspend the Arab League peace initiative had not yet been adopted by the Arab League, Saudi King Abdullah's warning in Kuwait that the initiative would not last forever sent a strong message to Israel and the West that Arab patience was running out. In this sense, assessed the Norwegian Embassy, Gaza had strengthened Hamas's message of resistance even among moderate Arab countries. Though Egypt and Jordan remained suspicious of Hamas, they both recognized the growing difficulty of keeping the organization marginalized, our contact said, adding "there will be increased on European countries to engage Hamas." Even France, he said, was now publicly acknowledging Hamas had a "role." On the issue of preventing Hamas from re-arming, our Norwegian Embassy contact appeared pessimistic: "You know Hamas can buy American small arms smuggled through Israel into Gaza, right?" he argued. "Even rocket parts will be difficult to keep out of Gaza."

18. (C) Comment: Bolstered by Syrian, Iranian, and Qatari political and financial support, Hamas leaders in Damascus appear ready to consolidate their PR victory in Gaza by turning up the heat in the political sphere. Hamas and Syria, whatever tensions may have existed under the surface concerning the terms of cease-fire, still share a sense of common purpose in boosting Hamas's profile in the region. The more important a player Hamas seems, the more valuable a "card" Hamas is for Syria. We expect Syrian and other Arab states to increase pressure on the Palestinian Authority to recognize and deal with Hamas as a partner.

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19. (C) Comment continued: Lost in the afterglow of Hamas's victory was any recognition by Hamas that human rights groups and others in Europe and the Arab world had registered criticism of the group's lack of concern for Gazans and its readiness to expose them to sacrifice. Mesha'al may be playing David to Israel's Goliath now, but he may soon find some of the heroic luster will fade if human rights and war crimes groups maintain even-handed scrutiny of both sides in the Gaza conflict.

CONNELLY